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## "Dones que feyan d'homens": The Construction of Gender in the Writing of Medieval Catalan History

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# "Dones que feyan d'homens": The Construction of Gender in the Writing of Medieval Catalan History

## Abstract

In the fourteenth-century Crown of Aragón, society considered a "good" woman, regardless of social class, to be a silent one who restricted herself to the domestic duties of the home. Once married, a good wife was to be chaste, bear many offspring, educate her children, manage the household, act piously, and uphold the good name of the family in all that she did.<sup>1</sup> Equally important was her obligation to serve as peacemaker and alliance builder, both inside and outside of her immediate family, by virtue of "her docility and capacity for submission" to her husband and his kin (Vecchio 109). Women of the nobility had additional expectations to fulfill. On occasions they were "expected to participate in political councils and their advice was often sought and considered in planning familial strategies and alliances" (Lois L. Huneycutt 189). A nobleman's wife was expected to serve as intercessor for those petitioning favors from her husband. By choosing an appropriate woman in marriage, a nobleman sought to ensure the loyalty of his vassals, augment his landed holdings, and polish his foreign policy. In sum, it was widely held that a woman's honor resided in her submission to her male kin, and her physical and verbal chastity.

## Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Medieval History | Modern Languages | Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature

## Comments

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# **“DONES QUE FEYAN D’HOMENS”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN THE WRITING OF MEDIEVAL CATALAN HISTORY**

**Dawn Bratsch-Prince**  
**Iowa State University**

In the fourteenth-century Crown of Aragón, society considered a “good” woman, regardless of social class, to be a silent one who restricted herself to the domestic duties of the home. Once married, a good wife was to be chaste, bear many offspring, educate her children, manage the household, act piously, and uphold the good name of the family in all that she did.<sup>1</sup> Equally important was her obligation to serve as peacemaker and alliance builder, both inside and outside of her immediate family, by virtue of “her docility and capacity for submission” to her husband and his kin (Vecchio 109). Women of the nobility had additional expectations to fulfill. On occasions they were “expected to participate in political councils and their advice was often sought and considered in planning familial strategies and alliances” (Lois L. Huneycutt 189). A nobleman’s wife was expected to serve as intercessor for those petitioning favors from her husband. By choosing an appropriate woman in marriage, a nobleman sought to ensure the loyalty of his vassals, augment his landed holdings, and polish his foreign policy. In sum, it was widely held that a woman’s honor resided in her submission to her male kin, and her physical and verbal chastity.

<sup>1</sup> Many of the expectations of a “good wife” are taken from the biblical model of Sarah in Tobias 10: 12-13: “Her parents, after hugging and kissing her, let her go, recommending that she honor her mother- and father-in-law, love her husband, look after the family, run the house, and behave irreproachably at all times” (Silvina Vecchio 105). See Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser (31-44) for additional examples of traditional behaviors expected of women.

These tenets of normative female behavior, based on an essentialist notion of gender and disseminated through popular literature, ecclesiastical institutions, and the law, made it impossible for a woman to act in the realm of official culture, for to speak in the public arena was a man's purview. Likewise, to oppose, rather than support, the political will of one's male kin was to be transgressive and aberrant.

In this essay, I would like to examine the gendered construction of two transgressive women in the pages of medieval Catalan history, Sibilia of Fortià, queen and fourth wife of Peter IV of Aragón, and Violant of Bar, duchess of Girona and wife to the future King John I. Each of these women participated significantly in the unruly political intrigue that came to characterize the Crown of Aragón in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. To be sure, neither Sibilia nor Violant fulfilled the behavioral expectations of the submissive wife, for both were ambitious and unafraid to use their positions of influence to target personal social and economic goals. Their unorthodox behavior, nevertheless, has to be reconciled with the traditional narrative structures available for writing women into history, namely the typologies of the good mother, the bad wife, the enchantress, the saintly Griselda, etc. Insofar as modern historians (e.g., Salvador Sanpere i Miquel, Josep M. Roca, E.L. Miron, Ferrán Soldevila, Rafael Olivar Bertrand, Rafael Tasis i Marca, Alberto Bóscolo, Thomas N. Bisson, and Carme Batlle) have written these women into their narratives, they have done so in specifically gendered ways, channeling the complex and untidy stories of these women's lives into stereotypical structures of female behavior. Uncritical, perhaps even unaware, of their biases, traditional historians have presented as "natural" and essential the gendered roles acted out by these women, eschewing the "conflict, ambiguity and tragedy" (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese 1982, 28 cited in Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn 21) so central to the historical process, and ultimately robbing them of any historical agency.

## A Tale of Two Marriages

In 1375, shortly after the death of Peter IV's third wife, Eleanor of Sicily, the fifty-six year old monarch took as his mistress a young widow of the lesser nobility of Ampuries, Sibilia of Fortià. At first, neither of Peter's sons by Eleanor, not John, the duke of Girona and heir apparent, nor his younger brother Martin, were much perturbed by their father's choice of "amistançada" or mistress, preferring it to a fourth

marriage and all the delicate political diplomacy a new union would entail. However, as Sibilia set up her own household, bestowed titles upon friends and kin from Ampuries, and gave birth to a daughter, Isabel of Aragón, in January 1377, the young princes' indifference turned to hostility. In October 1377, Peter and Sibilia were married in Barcelona, in the absence of the king's eldest son, whose resentments toward his father's uneducated mistress had seemingly grown into animosity (Bóscolo 27). Aware of the need to elevate his wife socially in the eyes of the older aristocracy, the king sought to surround Sibilia with suitable female companions and tutors who would teach her to read. To further legitimize his wife's position, Peter had her crowned in January 1381 in a lavish ceremony in Zaragoza, despite the refusal of his two sons to attend the ceremony. Both princes found themselves in a difficult and unpleasant situation, for as one historian conjectures, "they could not tolerate that a woman, lacking in culture and gentility, who was not of the upper nobility, a common woman, as they believed her to be, had taken the place of their mother" (Bóscolo 102).

As these events had been unfolding, the duke of Girona was performing in an equally complex drama of his own making. Widowed in 1378, John promptly began searching for a new wife, at the not-so-subtle instigation of his father. Peter made it clear to his heir that he had begun to arrange for his marriage to Peter's granddaughter, María, queen of Sicily. Desperate to reunite the crown of Sicily to that of Aragón, Peter's motivations were plainly political, despite the fact that María was John's half-niece.<sup>2</sup> John refused to acquiesce to the demands of his father, and in 1380 he chose as his second wife Violant of Bar, the well-educated, fifteen-year-old niece of Charles V of France. This flouting of parental wishes by the heir to the throne in a matter so central to the survival and growth of the royal house of Aragón would have been considered a significant act of rebellion (Janet Nelson 187). Rather than the capricious behavior of a hopeless Francophile, as it has been characterized, I believe John's defiance of his father's wishes is a response to Peter's conduct in the matter of Sibilia.<sup>3</sup> In any case,

<sup>2</sup> Constanza, Peter's daughter by María de Navarra, was married to the Sicilian king, Fadrique, brother of Peter's third wife, Eleanor of Sicily. Marriage by proxy took place September 21, 1356 at Perpignan. The king and queen of Naples landed and occupied Sicily shortly thereafter, so the arrival of the young bride was delayed until 1359. Fadrique and Constanza were united eventually and became parents of María, the future queen of Sicily and Peter's choice of wife for son John.

<sup>3</sup> John's motivation in squarely disregarding his father's wishes appeared to be three-fold: he was bothered in part by the question of consanguinity with María; he preferred

the prince's actions ultimately "sealed the breach" between father and son (Bisson 122) and led to the absence of Peter and Sibilia from John's wedding.

By 1382 the tension between King Peter and son John, and between the lesser nobility (supporters of the Fortià) and the older aristocracy (supporters of the duke and duchess of Girona), began to dominate the political arena. When the *corts generals* of 1383 sought to address the apparent extravagance of the royal family, the household of the duke and duchess of Girona were targeted in particular, as John and Violant's shared love of books, precious stones, costly clothing and animals were slowly draining the royal coffers. Subsequently, several advisors were accused of detrimentally influencing the royal couple, and the *corts*, at the insistence of Peter, demanded the immediate dismissal of Violant's *privada*, Constanza of Aragón, viscountess of Perellós.<sup>4</sup> The duchess began a vigorous campaign to prevent Constanza's dismissal, asserting her own authority over her personal affairs. Constanza's presence was allowed for a while longer, until it was rumored in 1385 that the recently-widowed viscountess was to marry the king's rebellious cousin, the count of Ampuries. The king, suspecting an alliance between John and the rebellious count, ordered John and Violant "to distance Constanza from their house" (Bóscolo 117), which they were finally forced to do.

Many additional minor conflicts ensued between Peter and his son, between the supporters of the lesser nobility and the supporters of the duke and duchess of Girona. When Peter died in January 1387, he was alone and abandoned by all, including his heir. His wife, Sibilia, realizing that her husband's end was near, had fled the royal palace late one December night, a few short days before his death, taking with her all that she could of her possessions. Upon his ascension to the throne, the new King John persecuted his step-mother for treason, but stopped short of ordering her death. The old king's death thus ended, for a time, the dysfunctional family dynamics of the royal palace.

the prospect of a French marriage; and he seemed set on exercising some autonomy in the decision-making process. Peter, infuriated by his son's snubbing of his wishes, sent him several angry letters, the most famous one written in November 1379, warning John of his potential disinheritance and containing satirical verses composed by the monarch himself (Olivar Bertrand 153).

<sup>4</sup> Peter's rancor towards Constanza had at its root her refusal to join the ranks of Sibilia's court as lady-in-waiting in 1377.

## Women Behaving Badly

Modern historians seem to agree that the political dissent and royal intrigue associated with this period of Catalano-Aragonese history had at its core the unconventional personalities of these two royal women, Sibilia of Fortià and Violant of Bar, women who, in the words of Sanpere i Miquel, "acted more like men than women" (178) by disregarding normative conceptions of moral female behavior. Historians have chosen instead to focus on the perceived manipulations of, and imagined rivalry between, two women rather than focusing on other, perhaps more complex, issues inherent in the difficult relations of the royal family, namely the active class struggle between the older established aristocracy –the counts of Cabrera, Centelles, Luna, Montcada, del Pallars, Pinós, Prades, Proxida, and Urgell, among others– and the increasingly powerful lesser nobility and merchant class; or the war of wills raging between the expansionist King Peter and his son, John, the superstitious "lover of gentility", as he was dubbed by contemporaries. Interpreted through the lens of gender, the transgressive actions of these women are seen to have destabilized the men and events around them.

How did these women specifically violate the gender code? At the most pragmatic level, Sibilia and Violant refused simply to acquiesce to the demands of the autocratic King Peter IV, and instead worked to enforce their own wills. Sibilia, for instance, dared to venture beyond the limits of her social class by becoming the mistress of a king. In the words of Alberto Bóscolo, she "had accepted becoming a political instrument, but she had kept one card in her hand ... she had gotten the king, who was more in love with her every day, to unite himself to her in legal matrimony" (100). His analysis suggests that Sibilia used her sexuality to earn a position of influence with the king, first as mistress and later as wife. In doing so, she won Peter's favor for the lesser nobility, among them her own brother, Bernat de Fortià, allowing them official positions in the court, to the outrage of many aristocrats.<sup>5</sup>

Violant's transgressive behavior is evident in the extent to which she participated in public matters, and the authority with which she opposed, rather than supported, the political aims of her father-in-

<sup>5</sup> Sibilia tried to arrange for the marriage of her brother to Timbor de Prades, the daughter of the count of Prades, but the proposal was resolutely rejected.



law and her husband. She arranged advantageous marriages for those who served her, fostered strong relations with her native France, and helped win Aragonese support for Pope Clement. A concrete example of her articulate authority is found in a letter to John in which she threatens to leave Aragón rather than allow Constanza, her confidante, to be banished from her household. In defying her husband, she avows: "I consent to no order, Constanza is a lady and exercises no office, and before I let them take her from my side, I'll consent to leaving the realm. If you, my husband and lord, want to sacrifice your servants, do it, as it is a matter of your conscience, but as regards Constanza, no one will touch her without my order" (Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Cancilleria, reg. 1817, fol. 97<sup>v</sup>). In this terse excerpt from her letter, Violant explicitly states that only she can "consent" or not, in matters that concern her. Shunning gendered expectations, she exhibits neither "docility" nor "capacity for submission" to her husband, the king, or the *corts*. Insofar as her use of the epistolary medium is a public act, with her letter she sought to insure a very audible existence to her willful words.

## Historical Fallout

In her monograph, *Medieval Women in French Historiography*, Susan Mosher Stuard surveys the landscape of French historiography, and poses the question, "how could forceful and effective women be accommodated into an interpretive framework that assumed that men were the active agents of historical change?" (60). Before this issue was raised in the twentieth century by Stuard and other historians of women's history, the author posits that the understood premise in French historiography, and I would venture to say in Spanish historiography as well, was that individuals controlled events, and since only men were truly individuals, men controlled the events of history. Women were deemed too numerous to incorporate into the historical fabric. Their lives, in any case, were defined and shaped by domesticity, marriage, and children, which, it was widely believed, had little to do with transformative historical events. In seeming contradiction of this view, however, Bisson has observed of the reign of Peter IV and his sons that, "[e]very perilous event of the reign was connected with marriage and its issue, with familial claims to land, with the want of heirs when needed or ... with their unwelcome survival" (104). By extension, I would assert that women's agency, acknowledged or not by historians,

was crucial to these questions of marriage, issue, and kin, and therefore central to the major events of the last half of the fourteenth century in the Crown of Aragón.

Both Sibilia and Violant entered the political scene as the unwelcome wives of influential men. While Sibilia was rural, uneducated, and lacking in gentility, the cosmopolitan Violant was schooled and well-prepared for the life of a queen. Differences in class, up-bringing, and ethnicity clearly participate in the historical construction of these women. Their feminine youth and physical attractiveness are what most color their representation in the pages of history, as the following examples will attempt to show.

Peter's young mistress and wife is fashioned "the siren of his old age" by E.L. Miron, who characterizes her as a "young, pleasure-loving widow" (196). For historian Sanpere i Miquel, Sibilia was "a lady that Ovid unfortunately justified, where he says 'to be beautiful and chaste are two advantages that cannot be found together'" (65-66). Tasis i Marca (1959, 93-94) fashions her "a woman still rather young, pretty of face and body", who knew "quickly how to take control of the heart and the will of the fiftyish-year-old monarch". Sibilia's youthful beauty and sexuality are soon made to be essential ingredients in all her actions. As the bed mate of the king, marriage cannot redeem Sibilia in the eyes of the king's sons, for "she is not the revered and absorbing mother", but rather "the stepmother who has come to usurp, even warming the bed of [queen] Elionor, her place, and her crown". Utilizing her beauty, "she does not rest a moment until she obtains that which she wants" (Bóscolo 105). For Sanpere i Miquel, the unchaste Sibilia had sold herself "for a crown" (77), while Miron concludes that the young queen "wrested from her infatuated royal lover the crown for which she had schemed by all the arts known to an unscrupulous and beautiful woman" (196). Miron touches upon the stereotyped notion of the scheming and beautiful woman who uses "arts" or trickery to control the actions of men, arts associated with superstition and the supernatural powers attributed to sirens and witches. Several historians agree that "the fame of the power of the new queen, who kept her husband enamored of her" was well known by their contemporaries (Bóscolo 105). Certainly Sibilia's youth and physical beauty, her social class and status as a widow, together with her lack of proper education brought suspicion upon her as a sorceress – for how else could one explain the king's infatuation with her but by sorcery? Sibilia planned her moves like a good chess player, knowledgeable of the weakness of [her] oponent (Roca 1928, 116). As presented

in modern historical narratives, the mighty Peter IV, count of Barcelona, king of Aragón, Valencia, and Mallorca, lord of Sardinia, Corsica and Romania, had been captured and imprisoned by the magical arts of a beautiful "siren".

Further proof of Sibilia's witchcraft situated by historians in her actions during her husband's last days, when she fled his deathbed in search of refuge in a distant castle. Olivar Bertrand describes the hour of Sibilia's flight from Peter's side, in the following suggestive manner: "At midnight on Saturday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, at the hour of the witches' sabbath, she abandoned her husband and fled the palace of Barcelona" (173). The historian proposes, with his reference to "the witch's sabbath", that the queen had some expertise in the magical arts. This attribution of magic, as many historians seem to defend, is natural as a logical outcome of the tumultuous events surrounding Peter's contentious final years, agonizing illness, and lonely death. Tasis i Marca holds that "[t]he difficulty of finding an explanation and remedy for this illness of the king ... led ... to its attribution to black magic. And it seems, as a natural derivation, that one would look for those responsible for the spells among the people that surrounded queen Sibilia" (1980, 166). For our traditional historians, Sibilia's "natural" association with black magic grows out of her gender and sexuality. Not all condemn her as such, however. Her sexuality also allows her to be cast in the role of another infamous and sinful woman, as evidenced in the words with which Roca ends his 1928 monograph on Sibilia: "Let us honor the memory of Sibilia, for if, as Mary Magdalene, she had sinned greatly, she had also loved greatly" (158). From prostitute, to mistress, to wife, to queen, Sibilia's gender and sexuality are at the core of her historical representation.

While Sibilia has been constructed as the seductress who used her body to dominate her husband, Violant has been characterized consistently by her intelligence and ambition. Despite the dysfunction of the Aragonese royal family, Violant and John, by all accounts, made a formidable couple who exhibited affection and respect for each other during their sixteen-year marriage. They shared a love of finery and a voracious intellectual curiosity, and the strong-willed Violant provided the strength her husband needed to endure his many illnesses. Nonetheless, Violant does not escape the condescending and gendered judgment of those who state that, as an ambitious woman she "knows that, if she can make hers the spirit of her husband, it will be she who directs the affairs of the country on the not so distant day in which he ascends

to the Aragonese throne" (Tasis i Marca 1959, 93-94). Ambition coupled with intelligence made Violant a dangerous woman.

Violant's verbal ventures into the public arena have caused her to be labeled a "manly woman". Any woman who participated in official culture, as she did by virtue of her own writings, her patronage of the arts, her dissemination of new music and literature, lost her feminine qualities and was "masculinized according to the criteria of the dominant school of thought" (Cristina Segura Graíño 73). This sense of her gendered "otherness" is accentuated by her husband's lack of traditional "masculine" qualities, namely interest in military combat or statesmanship. Violant's violation of traditional gender roles and her manly behavior played off of and contributed to her husband's effeminate portrayal as the "lover of finery". Sanpere i Miquel synthesizes the critical attitude that has prevailed towards John which held him to be "the effeminate prince who abandons to his wife the governing of the state in order to dedicate himself wholly to the pleasures of the hunt, of poetry and of music" (17).

Violant's manly traits underscore the king's womanly qualities, and indeed are seen as their cause by some historians: much as Eve was blamed for Adam's moral weakness and transgression, so Violant was deemed responsible for the inept leadership and opulence that permeated the Aragonese court of the period. Tasis i Marca (1980, 153-154) echoes the words of earlier historians stating that: "John was to fall completely, and quickly, under the influence of his wife". Seeking to identify the weaknesses of John's rule, the Catalan historian sexualizes Violant, portraying her as "young and pretty ... happy in spirit and in customs". For many, she, not John or his father, was the one who introduced to the court "a ... complicated game of favoritism and an elevated number of functionaries and courtesans". Tasis i Marca (1980, 154) claims that Violant exerted such power over her husband by "taking advantage of the arts of a woman who knows herself to be loved", alluding to the same devious, perhaps supernatural powers that were attributed to Sibilia. Following Wiesner's reading of sixteenth-century political writers, who held "effeminate" to include both a man's "imitation of" woman, as well as his "domination by" her, John is indeed "effeminate". As a rule, then, in characterizations of the period, Violant's masculinization prompts John's feminization,<sup>6</sup> which signified

<sup>6</sup> In her study of the representations of Isabel of Castilla, another strong medieval queen, Barbara Weissberger charges that Isabel's brother and predecessor, Enrique IV, is

both his imitation of, as well as his domination by, female behavior, manifest, respectively, in his love of song and dance and his surrender to Violant's leadership.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, historical narratives have taken a more imaginative turn in their characterizations of these two women. Of particular colorfulness is the rivalry or "cat-fight" envisioned between them, based on their sexuality. The youth and physical beauty of the women is blamed for this competition, for "the fact that the two ladies were seen as young and beautiful ought to have been sufficient enough" in the view of Olivar Bertrand, "to spark the rivalry between them" (160-61). Peter is claimed to have "dismissed his son from the charge of lieutenancy which corresponded to him as heir" because he witnessed his reign "in disarray because of feminine maneuvers and hatred" (Soldevila 496-97). For Tasis i Marca the rivalry between these woman was a natural one, because Violant "was a very liberal and charitable woman, superintelligent and ambitious. All these conditions, as well as the *natural* rivalry with Sibilia, placed her in competition with [her husband's] stepmother" (1980, 155). Soldevila claims that this female rivalry "escalated violently and gave way to bitter family fights" (495). The contentious and complex disputes in the Aragonese crown surged, not between king and prince, father and son, but rather between Sibilia and Violant and their respective factions. Meanwhile the senile Peter<sup>7</sup> and weak John were unable to act because of their spouses' clever manipulation of them, as Olivar Bertrand so clearly articulates: "The old king was dominated by his clever wife, and at the same time, duke John was guided always by the indications of his delectable and cunning little wife" (161). Although Bisson nods to the notion of a rivalry between Violant and Sibilia, soberly explaining that "Violant threatened Sibilia's ascendancy" by introducing "fine vestments, jewelry, feasts, and balls", he also acknowledges that Violant found herself obliged, in a sense, to participate in matters of government, for in light of her husband's frequent illnesses, it was left to her "to play an increasingly political role" (122). In con-

constructed (and criticized) as effeminate while she is fashioned as manly: "the homophobic construction of an impotent, sodomitical, and therefore effeminate Enrique is inseparable from the simultaneous misogynistic construction of a masculinized Isabel, whose gender-inappropriate power and authority produces, I argue, an unacknowledged political and sexual anxiety in the humanist authors of her official story" (191).

<sup>7</sup> Peter's behavior can only be explained, according to Olivar Bertrand, by "la degeneración senil" (165).

trast, Soldevila, citing "feminine maneuvers and hatred" (496-97), places the blame of the problems of the Aragonese monarchy, and the ensuing difficulties of the Compromise of Caspe in 1412, squarely on the shoulders of these two women, a quick and easy solution to a messy political process.

The depiction of the politics of late fourteenth-century Aragón, and the role that Sibilia of Fortià and Violant of Bar played in these matters, has been reconstructed by modern historians using data culled from letters, proceedings of the *corts*, literary texts, and medieval chronicles, all of which are ideologically biased and susceptible to the intrigues of contemporary popular beliefs. In a similar study of the gendered representation of Elizabeth I of England, Carole Levine explains that the sources extant for this representation "tell us a great deal about the social-psychological response to a female ruler, moreso, perhaps, than about the woman herself" (95). Likewise, an analysis of the gendered constructions of Sibilia and Violant should seek to uncover the "social-psychological" processes that informed contemporary, as well as modern reaction to two transgressive women, one a beautiful commoner, the other an ambitious foreigner, who simply did not fit the desired model of a queen. When pondering the political agitations so characteristic of late fourteenth-century Aragón, Sanpere i Miquel echoes the question silently posed by so many Catalan historians: "what else could have occurred [politically] with matters in the hands of men who were worse than women, and in the hands of women who acted as men?" (178).

In rethinking the gendered representations of these two women in the narratives of Catalan history, we must avoid substituting, in the words of Fox-Genovese, "the chronicle of the female subject for that of the male" (cited in Greene and Kahn 21). Rather we must read historical narratives through the lens of gender in a necessary attempt to restore conflict and ambiguity, "messiness" so to speak, to the core of historical process and its representation.

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